# THE USE OF REASON AND REFLECTION ON RELIGIOUS SUBJECTS, A SERMON.

LONDON,

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MDCCLXIV.

TO THE

RIGHT HONOURABLE

# LORD HENLEY,

BARON of GRANGE,

LORD HIGH CHANCELLOR
of GREAT-BRITAIN,

AND

One of His MAJESTY'S Moſt Honourable
PRIVY COUNCIL.

*MY LORD,*

*AS You preſide over the High Court of Equity, and are the ſupreme Arbiter of Truth under the King in theſe Realms, this Diſcourſe is humbly addreſſed to Your Lordſhip for Your Patronage; and ſince this Child of Reaſon appears in the World deſtitute of any Parent, and in the Form of an Orphan, it may have ſome Pretenſions to the Privilege of being a Ward under Your Protection. Your Pardon is implored for the Author's withdrawing himſelf, leaving this Charge upon Your Hands, and truſting to Your Goodneſs, in ſuppoſing that he hath his Reaſons for it.*

*But ſhould Curioſity prompt Your Lordſhip to enquire who hath taken this uncommon Liberty with Your Name, if you will give*

*Yourſelf the Trouble to recollect who was known to You in Your earlieſt Part of Life, and is probably the oldeſt Acquaintance You have now living, this Anecdote will lead You to recognize him who is,*

*With the greateſt Veneration,*

*Your* LORDSHIP's

*Moſt devoted humble Servant.*

# ISAIAH XLVI. 8.

*Remember this, and ſhew yourſelves Men, bring it again to Mind, O ye Tranſgreſſors!*

THE idolatries of the people of Iſrael are the ſubject of the two preceding chapters; the Lord, by his prophet Iſaiah, is there exclaiming againſt their folly, in worſhiping images: in the xlivth chapter, He expoſtulates with them in theſe words: They take part of a tree for fuel, to warm themſelves, and the other part they make their God, even their graven image, they fall down unto and worſhip it, and pray unto it, and ſay, Deliver me, for thou art my God: none conſidereth in his heart, neither is there knowledge or underſtanding, to ſay, I have burned part of it in the fire, I have baked bread upon the coals thereof; and ſhall I make the reſidue thereof an abomination? ſhall I fall down to the ſtock of a tree? Remember theſe, O Jacob and Iſrael!

And, in the xlvith chapter, He reaſons with them after the ſame manner, upon their molten, as He had done upon their wooden images,

They laviſh gold out of the bag, and weigh ſilver in the balance, and hire a goldſmith, and he maketh it a God; they fall down, yea they worſhip: they bear him upon their ſhoulders, they carry him, and ſet him in his place, and he ſtandeth; from his place ſhall he not remove; yea one ſhall cry unto him, yet can he not anſwer, nor ſave him out of his trouble: remember this, and ſhew yourſelves men; bring it again to mind, O ye tranſgreſſors!

That is, conſider with yourſelves, that, what you have ſet up for your God, is mere ſenſeleſs matter, incapable of hearing your prayers, or of redreſſing your wants; and that the whole proceſs, from the beginning to the end, of this apotheoſis proves it to be ſo; therefore ſhew yourſelves men, ſhew that you have the uſe of your rational faculties, by examining theſe ſelf-evident truths, and bring them again to mind.

This is the drift and purport of the words of my text; and the uſe that I ſhall make of them will be contained in the following obſervations.

The firſt remarkable thing implied in them is, that the moſt glaring abſurdities and impieties may be introduced and practiſed in religious worſhip.

For what can be more abſurd than to ſuppoſe an inanimate material ſubſtance, either from the figure it was wrought into, or the ceremonies it paſſed through, or the place it was enſhrined in, to be transformed into a God,

God, inveſted, at leaſt, with almighty power, for the loweſt notion of a Deity includes this attribute, to fall down and worſhip it, and to pay all kinds of divine honours to it, though, at the ſame time, there was no viſible tranſformation in the ſubſtance itſelf; but it ſtill retained, to all appearance, every property of lifeleſs matter. This is ſuch a groſs abuſe of the ſenſes, and ſo ſhocking to common underſtandings, that it would be an high affront to mankind, even to ſuppoſe the poſſibility of it, was it not known to be an indiſputable fact, and warranted by the moſt authentic records of ancient hiſtory.

This idolatry likewiſe was no leſs impious than fooliſh.

The knowledge of the Being of a God, of His unity, and infinite perfections, had been communicated to the children of Iſrael by their inſpired writings. They had learned from them, that He had made a covenant with their forefathers, had vouchſafed to ſtyle Himſelf the God of Abraham, of Iſaac, and of Jacob, and had choſen their ſeed for his peculiar people; that He had, by an extraordinary Providence, reſcued them from the Ægyptian bondage, preſerved them in the wilderneſs and ſettled them in the land of Canaan; that he had inſtituted a Theocracy among them, and, in a very particular manner, guarded them againſt polytheiſm and idolatry. The two firſt commandments, which God himſelf gave to them by the hand of Moſes, were, Thou ſhalt have no other *Gods* but me;

Thou ſhalt not make to thyſelf any graven image. Theſe were wrote upon a table of ſtone, for a perpetual ſtanding memorial of their duty; and they were ordered to weave them into their garments, and to inſcribe them upon the pillars of their houſes, that they might be continually reminding themſelves of them, and, from thence, tranſcribe them upon the tables of their hearts. Idolatry likewiſe was marked out by their law, as a crime of the moſt capital nature, and inhibited by the ſevereſt penalties; for the moſt dreadful of all temporal puniſhments, viz. famine, peſtilence and the ſword, with utter extirpation, were denounced againſt the whole nation, ſhould this vice become epidemical: and the individual, in whoſe houſe or poſſeſſion any idol was found, was ſentenced to be deſtroyed, together with his family, and all that appertained to him.

But, notwithſtanding all theſe precautions for preventing the beginning and ſpreading of this Abomination; and, notwithſtanding the monſtrous abſurdities and horrid impieties with which it abounded, in proceſs of time it became the popular and faſhionable vice; not only among a few, or for a little time, but among all their tribes, and for many ages; for we read of it in the Pentateuch, in the Chronicles of almoſt every king, and in the writings of all the prophets. Their land, ſaith Iſaiah, is full of idols; they worſhip the work of their own hands, that which their fingers

fingers have made: the mean man boweth down, the great man humbleth himſelf.

Hence it is evident, that the moſt abſurd and impious things have been introduced and practiſed in religious worſhip; and it is as certain they may be, for the ſame cauſes will always produce the ſame effects, and theſe cauſes were not peculiar to the people of Iſrael, neither were they owing to ſuch rare incidents or critical conjunctures as could never happen at any other time, or in any other nation; but they were as general as the ignorance and folly of mankind; which will plainly appear, if we conſider, that, as the Deity is the ultimate object of divine worſhip, the manner and ſubſtance of it will be according to the opinions that are conceived of Him. Where theſe opinions are juſt and true, the religion will be ſolid and rational: but, ſhould they be imperfect and falſe, the religion likewiſe will be maimed or abſurd. But imperfect or falſe opinions reſult from crude obſervations, minute reaſonings, or ungoverned paſſions, which are not particular, local, or national, but common to all mankind.

The firſt things that ſtrike the ſenſes, and put men upon thinking of and acknowledging a Supreme Being, are generally the wonderful works of power. Many, indeed, are ſo thoughtleſs and ſtupid, as to let them paſs unheeded, in the common courſe of nature; for though there cannot be ſtronger proofs of omnipotency than what daily occur to us, and are conſtantly before our eyes; yet cuſtom,

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by rendering them familiar, lulls our attention to ſleep; but, when God is pleaſed to ſhew Himſelf in mighty thunders and lightenings, inundations and earthquakes, in wide-waſting peſtilences and famines, then the inhabitants of the earth are rouzed from their lethargy, all fear and tremble, and an aweful ſenſe of a Superiour Being is deeply imprinted upon their minds: ſome few, awakened by theſe alarming inſtances of this ſtupendous attribute, will improve upon them, and make farther inquiries into the nature of the Moſt High; but the generality of mankind will ſit down, with theſe terrible ideas, which their panics have raiſed of Him, and, viewing Him through the mirror of this paſſion, will look upon Him as a moſt tremendous Being, armed with almighty power, abſtracted from every other perfection, and wielding this power with apparent wrath in the deſtruction of his creatures. It is eaſy to gueſs, what the religion of theſe perſons muſt be; they will worſhip God as the King of Terrors, with a trembling heart; they will cringe before him with the moſt abject ſervility; earneſtly begging to be exempted from the vengeance of his fury; and, perhaps, would be glad to compound for the favour which Polyphemus conferred on Ulyſſes, viz. that they ſhould be the laſt devoured.

There is no paſſion in human nature which hath been ſo fruitful of ſuperſtitions, as this of fear: it gave riſe to that reigning opinion among

among the ancients of a ſelf-exiſtent evil Being, preſiding, at leaſt, over half the world: ſuch was Oſiris held to be, among the Ægyptians, and, from them, among all the Eaſtern nations.

Fear produced different effects, according to the different tempers it had to work upon, or the different paſſions it was compounded with.

In effeminate and puſillanimous minds, where it was the ſole or maſter-paſſion, the Deity was pictured with the moſt ghaſtly forms their affrightened imaginations could draw, and, in the words of the Pſalmiſt, as a man feared, ſo was His diſpleaſure. Pſal. xc. 11. Hence, ſome worſhiped evil ſpirits and Demons, others enſhrined and idolized the moſt noxious animals, as ſerpents, dragons and crocodiles, being the moſt obnoxious to their fears.

When this paſſion was balanced with pride and a warm imagination, as either paſſion prevailed, it held up preſumption or deſpair: if fear was uppermoſt, the ſoul was hung with mournful horrors, all was darkneſs and deſpair: but, when pride rode triumphant, then the mind was elated with vain confidences upon the favour of the Deity; and the ecſtatic fervours which over-weening fancy kindled in the breaſt of the enthuſiaſt were interpreted for divine inſpirations: of this kind of worſhipers were the Sybilline and Pythian prieſts and prieſteſſes among the heathens; the Kataphrygians, or Montaniſts,

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and the Marcoſians, in the primitive times of Chriſtianity; and ſuch are the Janſeniſts, Pietiſts and Methodiſts of the preſent age.

Again, fear operated very differently in ſtern and imperious conſtitutions; here the Deity appeared as an inexorable and cruel tyrant. Perſons of this rigid complexion, inſtead of being ſoftened, were brutalized by their religion; inhumanity was incorporated into their divinity, and the more barbarous and ſavage theſe devotees made themſelves, the nearer reſemblance they bore to their Deity; they therefore endeavoured to recommend themſelves to him by the moſt atrocious acts of violence, and from their furious zeal they perpetrated the moſt ſhocking murders, butchering innocent perſons, nay, even their neareſt relations (whoſe lives, by the ſtricteſt ties of nature, honour and conſcience, they were moſt obliged to preſerve) not only deliberately and in cool blood, but devoutly, as a ſacred act of piety and the moſt acceptable immolation to their God.

Of this claſs were the votaries of Nemeſis and Mars, among the Greeks and Romans, and the worſhipers of Moloch, among the Canaanites; theſe laſt, as is well known, exerciſed cruelties upon themſelves and their families; for they cut their own fleſh with knives and lancets, they made their children paſs through the fire to his grim idol; and ſtained his altar with human gore. Of the Jews likewiſe we read, that ſome of their fathers ſhed innocent blood, even the blood of their

their ſons, and of their daughters, whom they ſacrificed unto the idols of Canaan, and the land was defiled with blood*.

But, though fear, or ſome compoſition of it, is the general cauſe, yet ſeveral other intemperate paſſions have been the parents of ſuperſtition. Men have made to themſelves, Gods after their own luſts, and have either deified their objects, or ſet divinities over them. St. Paul ſays of the Cretians, that their God was their belly. And, in another place, that covetouſneſs is idolatry. The Apoſtle, perhaps, might intend, not to charge the ſenſualiſt or miſer with believing pleaſure or gold to be real Gods, but only with ſerving them with as much devotion as if they were: however that be, it is certain, ſome have adored the God of riches, of drunkenneſs, and libidinous pleaſures, as real Beings: temples have been erected and conſecrated for their ſervice, ſacrifices have been offered upon their altars, and their neceſſary ſelf-exiſtence, with ſeveral other properties of a Deity, hath been ſuppoſed, by the ſacred formalities with which they have been treated, and the ſolemn addreſſes made to them.

Innumerable are the phrenſies which have ſprung from this prolific ſource; but thoſe already mentioned are abundantly ſufficient to eſtabliſh my firſt obſervation, viz. That the moſt abſurd and impious things have been introduced, and practiſed, in religious worſhip.

* Pſalm cvi. ver. 38.

The next obſervation that naturally offers itſelf to us, from the words of my text, is, that *Reaſon and common Senſe are the proper Judges of religious Inſtitutions and Doctrines.*

The abſurdities which the Jews were guilty of in their idolatrous worſhip, are laid before them in the moſt plain and familiar manner; God himſelf, by His Prophet, appeals to their underſtandings, and argues with them from the principles of human reaſon: He bids them judge, whether it was not a ſhocking abuſe of common ſenſe to ſuppoſe the reſidue of a log of wood, part of which they had burned in the fire, and warmed themſelves with, to be metamorphoſed, without any viſible change in it's ſubſtance, into an immaterial, immortal, and ſelf-exiſting Being; to proſtrate themſelves before it, and pay all kinds of divine honours to it, as if it was the ſovereign Lord of heaven and earth, from whom they received all they had, and expected all they wanted. Remember this; that is, reflect and conſider with yourſelves, upon the abſurdity of this behaviour. Prove this idol by your ſenſes, whether it hath not all the properties of wood; view it, doth it not retain all the appearance of a ſenſeleſs block? Are there any ſigns of life or motion in it? Handle it, is it not hard and impenetrable? May it not be cleft, or ſawed, or uſed in the ſame manner as any other piece of timber? Put it into the fire, will it not burn as freely as the other part? What difference is there between them? Only compare them, and you will find none; why

why then do you think ſo differently of them? Or, if you truſt to your ſenſes and judgment in one caſe, why do you give them up in an other? This partial application of your underſtanding is unbecoming the character of a rational Being; exert, therefore, your intellectual faculties in every caſe, and ſhew yourſelves men, as well in religious as natural ſubjects.

From this familiar expoſtulation of the Deity with the Jews, upon the vanity of their idolatries, from His putting theſe things to the teſt of their ſenſes and their underſtandings, and, from this divine injunction, to acquit themſelves like men, by canvaſſing, conſidering, and reflecting upon them, I infer, that human reaſon is a proper judge of religious ſubjects, and that it is incumbent upon every rational being to try them by it.

This is a direct and immediate conſequence from the words of my text, and the occaſion of them: for it will not be ſaid, that reaſon is to ſit upon this kind of ſuperſtition and no other; all are alike abſurd and impious; if, therefore, we muſt judge of one, we may judge of all; for, otherwiſe, how is it poſſible to know which is ſubject to our ſcrutiny and which not? Or what ſhould exempt any from it? Which are the vanities that have the privilege of taking ſuch ſanctuary in religion, as to make it a profanation for reaſon to touch them? or which ſhould be ſo idolized as to have it ſacrificed to them?

And, ſurely, it will not be ſaid, that we may judge of ſuperſtition but not of religion:

the permiſſion to try baſe, but not ſterling gold, carries an inconſiſtency along with it; for how are we to diſtinguiſh them from each other, till we have tried them? and, by trying what is falſe, we muſt try what is true, the one neceſſarily implies the other; for if we are to put nothing into the ſcales of reaſon, but what is light, it is ſuppoſed that we know what is light, and what is not, before we have weighed it; that is, we know it without reaſon, which is abſurd, and contrary to what was admitted; if, therefore, counterfeit religion may be brought to the balance of reaſon, true religion may be ſo likewiſe.

And again, if religion in general be once admitted, it muſt always continue to be the ſubject of reaſon; for there is nothing in the nature of religion that ſhould render it at one time leſs ſubject to it than another; beſides, there may be innovations in religion, corrupt doctrines or practices, like the tares among the wheat, may be ſowed, or grow up with it, and which cannot be ſeparated from it, unleſs reaſon retains it's power over it: the underſtanding, likewiſe, may be ſtronger, or better informed, by which means errors in the firſt judgment may be rectified in the ſecond; and, therefore, reaſon being once, muſt always continue to be, a judge of it.

But the importance of this ſubject deſerves, and demands, a fuller and more particular diſcuſſion.

Reaſon, then, is the peculiar property of man, which diſtinguiſhes him from, and ſets him above, the whole viſible creation. Other

Other Beings have external ſenſes in common with him, they ſee, feel, ſmell, and hear, and ſome of them in a more exquiſite degree than he doth : theſe ſenſes, likewiſe, are a kind of mechanical powers, receiving their images from extraneous objects, and conveying them to the ſenſorium by fixed laws of nature ; and, whilſt things continue in the ſame ſtate, they act, and are acted upon, in the ſame manner, and are ſubject to no changes but what are independent or involuntary. Again, man can claim no preeminence over the animal world from his appetites or affections; they are blind and neceſſary attractions or repulſions, having no guidance or direction of themſelves, but permanently tend to, or from, the ſame things : other creatures not only enjoy them in common with him, but, ſeemingly, in greater perfection ; for they have them moderated by nature, and ſcarce ſubject to exceſs ; but in men they are apt to be riotous, and, if left to themſelves, will prove him inſane and monſtrous.

Memory, Imagination, Invention, and Conſcience, are the appendages of Reaſon, they neceſſarily accompany it, and muſt be reckoned as the conſequential parts of it.

Man, therefore, excluſive of his intellectual powers, differs from inferiour animals in no other manner than as they, in their ſeveral ſpecies, differ from one another, and would be properly placed under the ſame genus of neceſſary irrational agents.

It is reaſon, then, that ennobles his nature, and exalts him to a much ſuperiour claſs. But

But this ſuperiority will appear more evident, if we conſider the privileges it confers upon him.

For, firſt, it is the principle of liberty: it exempts him from the chains of neceſſity, and renders him a free agent: it enables him to collect, compare, and reflect, upon the reports of his ſenſes, and to ſuperintend, and moderate his appetites and paſſions, and, in many natural things, to diſcern between truth and falſhood. I do not aſſert that man is a perfectly free agent, any more than he is a perfectly rational Being; he is only both in part, and hath the principles of neceſſity as well as liberty within him; all that is meant is, that, ſo far as man is free, he is entirely beholden to his reaſon for it.

But, however ſmall a portion of it his munificent Creatour hath been pleaſed to honour him with, yet, if he be compared with creatures wholly void of it, what a mighty difference doth it make between them! and what prodigious advantages doth he enjoy from it over them? Doth it not render him, in a moſt eminent degree, a contemplative, converſible, and communicative Being? With what enlarged capacities doth he act in ſocial and political life? What a field of ſpeculation and practice doth it open to him? Doth he not from hence derive all his attainments in wiſdom and philoſophy, in arts, ſciences, and manufactures? And doth it not give birth to infinite employments for the procurements of the neceſſaries and conveniencies of life?

But,

But, ſecondly, it is the peculiar excellency of reaſon to be the principle of morality; for it furniſhes man with a ſenſe of the circumſtances he is placed in, of his connexions with, and relations to the perſons he is concerned with: it likewiſe ſupplies him with a conſciouſneſs of an obligation to act agreeable to them. From this principle he perceives what good things Providence hath done for him, and what He expects him to do for himſelf: thus it ſets a rule before him for the direction of the liberty, and the uſe of the powers it hath conferred upon him: it doth not, indeed, ſet a rule before him of it's own making, but only makes it known to him; for truth and rectitude are in nature and independent of him, and the knowledge of them his reaſon, in part, communicates to him, and informs him that they are the inſtitutions of the God of nature, who wills his conformity to them. Thus reaſon conſtitutes him a moral agent, and inveſts him with the power of being wiſe or fooliſh, virtuous or vitious, good or evil.

Reaſon, by making us moral, makes us religious Beings, for morality comprehends our whole conduct, when applied to good and evil, and religion is included in it, as it is that branch of it which relates to the Deity.

But, to be more explicit upon this ſubject, we will conſider reaſon, in reſpect both to natural and revealed religion.

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The whole of natural religion is evidently founded upon reaſon: for how do we acquire any idea of a Supreme Being? it cannot be from our external ſenſes, becauſe He is an inviſible, ſpiritual ſubſtance, neither can it be from our affections, for, though they may feel the effects of his power or goodneſs, they are tied down to the preſent objects, and cannot abſtract ideas, or ſeparate goodneſs or power from them, and place them in ſome agent; this would be inferring cauſes from effects, which is the province or property of reaſon; every apprehenſion therefore of the Deity implies ſome act of the underſtanding, and every notion or conception of him is according to it's uſe of the means which lead to the knowledge of him; hence reaſon lays the foundation of natural religion, by diſcovering the great object of it.

In like manner, as it helps us to the knowledge of the Supreme Being, ſo, through it's means, we acquire a ſenſe of our relation to, and connexion with him; for this reſults from the conſideration of his infinite power, wiſdom, and goodneſs, and of our weakneſs, ignorance, and dependency; and from theſe abſtract ideas, it ſtill proceeds to abſtract others from them, and to infer the duties of reverence, love, thankſgiving, gratitude, reſignation, obedience, and every other part of pious devotion.

Thus, are we indebted for the whole ſum and ſubſtance of natural religion to the powers of reaſon; and it is called the religion of nature,

ture, or the catholic religion *, becauſe it is the religion which the light of nature or the reaſon of mankind diſcovers to us; and as reaſon is the ſole author of it to us, ſo it muſt be a proper and ſufficient judge of all that appertains to it.

Let us now proceed to examine how far revealed religion comes under the province of reaſon; and, for ſetting this point in a clear light, we will conſider reaſon firſt with reſpect to the proofs, and then to the doctrines of revelation.

Firſt then in reſpect to it's proofs:

In order to convince mankind of a revelation from God, there muſt, of neceſſity, be an appeal made to their underſtandings; and the making this appeal ſuppoſes the underſtanding to be a competent judge of it, or that the proofs offered are ſuited to it's capacities, and ſufficient for a rational conviction.

This likewiſe is evident from the nature of the proofs themſelves;

For they are of two kinds, external and internal. The external are proofs of a ſupernatural power or knowledge; the internal, of the divinity of that power or knowledge. The external proofs are manifeſt appeals to the underſtanding, through the ſenſes: of this kind are miracles and prophecies, with their completion, which being exhibited in an unreſerved and public manner, are viſible demonſtrations of a ſupernatural power or knowledge; and of his being ſome extraor-

* For Catholic Religion ſee Athanaſian Creed.

dinary perſon who is endowed with them: there may be ſome internal proofs intermixed with them, but, for perſpicuity's ſake, we muſt conſider them abſtractedly from them, and barely as external proofs: and as ſuch they are laid before us, on purpoſe to convince us of a ſupernatural power or knowledge, they are ſubmitted to our reaſon, and we are called upon to make it the teſt or judge of them; and therefore it is it's proper office to examine whether there is any deception in them, and whether they are really what they pretend to be, and manifeſtly exceed the ordinary powers of nature; and, if we be not eye-witneſſes of theſe proofs, but receive them from the relation of thoſe who were, or from more diſtant tradition; then it is it's buſineſs to inquire diligently into the number and credibility of the relators; or the authenticity and univerſality of the tradition, and, from thence, to form it's judgment of them: reaſon therefore, in all caſes, is evidently a proper judge of the external proofs of a revelation; and, from a review of this part of it's credentials, it refers us to the examination of the other part, viz. the internal proofs; and theſe are the doctrines of a revelation which are level to our underſtandings, and which are ſuppoſed, from the nature of a proof itſelf, to be tried by the principles of reaſon; but theſe principles are the eſtabliſhed rules of morality, and the general received opinions of the Being and attributes of the Deity; theſe are laid down as ſtandard truths,

truths, and we are to judge of the divinity of a revelation from the agreement or diſagreement of it's ſubject matter with them: that is, we are to conſider whether any thing is advanced inconſiſtent with natural duty; whether it contains any doctrine that is abſurd, inhuman, or impious; or contrary to the common ſenſe of mankind, or the common received laws of morality; whether it diſcourages virtue, or countenances vice; or whether it be, in any circumſtance, unworthy of the Deity, or derogatory of the perfections which, by the catholic religion, are aſcribed to Him: ſhould any thing of this kind appear, it will ſink itſelf and whatever adheres to it; this ſingle teſtimony will outweigh all other evidences; and, whatever ſigns of power, ſhould even an angel from heaven come to prove it's divinity, yet they would be over balanced by the proofs which reaſon brings againſt it.

But if no leſſon be taught contrary to what is contained in the book of nature, nor any ſcripture tend to obliterate the characters written ſo plainly on the heart, that he who runs may read them; if there ſhould be found a complete harmony between natural and revealed religion; if This ſhould ratify, reſtore, improve and enforce the moral law; if the more ſtrictly it be canvaſſed the more rational it appears, and, in general, if it be ſuch a revelation as human underſtanding, when beſt informed, hath abundant reaſon to ſuppoſe an omnipotent, omniſcient, all-juſt and all-

gracious Sovereign of the world would make, whenever he ſhould vouchſafe to communicate, in this explicit manner, His will to mankind, then there are all the concurrent teſtimonies of ſupernatural power, wiſdom, and goodneſs, in the works of revelation, to eſtabliſh it's divinity, as there are, in the works of nature, to convince us of the Being and Perfections of God: in both caſes the proofs are of the ſame kind, they are appeals to human underſtandings, or they are references to a ſtandard ſet up by human reaſon, and which is no other than the natural and moral truths which the common ſenſe of mankind hath recognized and admitted, as firſt principles.

Laſtly, how can it be aſcertained what is worthy or unworthy of the Deity, but by applying it to thoſe general conceptions which, through the light of nature, have been formed of Him: there muſt be an antecedent worthineſs or unworthineſs in the mind, and the idea of wiſdom, power, and goodneſs, muſt be there firſt eſtabliſhed by reaſon; which is made the rule, or canon, for trying the things that are attributed to Him.

Miſtake me not, I do not aſſert that human reaſon is an adequate judge of the actions of the Almighty, or that man hath any right to ſit upon them, and determine, in an abſolute ſenſe, what is worthy or unworthy of the Supreme Governour of the world: he hath no buſineſs to concern himſelf with His adminiſtration, any farther than as it relates to himſelf, and is the neceſſary ſubject matter

for

for forming his faith, or adjuſting his conduct; and ſo far it is ſubmitted to his examination.

The works of the Deity are infinite in their number and kind; they are ſet at all diſtances from us; ſome few lie juſt before us, they are placed at a proper point of view, and we have a full ſight of them.

Some are a little farther diſtant from us; great part of them appear diſtinct, but ſome part is confuſed.

Again, others are ſtill farther removed, here the diſtinctneſs grows leſs, and the confuſion increaſes, till, at length, we loſe all ſight of them.

What then, are in the reach of our underſtanding, are nothing in compariſon to what are beyond it, and, as theſe removes are infinite, ſo are the objects in them, which muſt, of neceſſity, be incomprehenſible or myſterious to us: all, indeed, declare the wiſdom, power, and goodneſs of their great Creatour, but the few only which are perceptible by us, either in whole or in part, declare them to us. Theſe are properly our demonſtrations of the Being and Attributes of God, and theſe we may canvaſs, for He who made both us and them hath made us a judge of them, by adapting our capacities to them, and ſetting them as proofs of Himſelf to us. Theſe, then, are the revelations of the Deity in natural religion; here we plainly ſee His footſteps, and upon theſe we reſt our faith in Him, and infer, that all things above our underſtanding

underſtanding are alike the works of His hands, and equally perfect in their kinds.

Juſt ſo it is in revealed religion: what is plain and obvious is the object of reaſon, and ſubmitted to human judgment; it is the evidence of it's truth, and alſo of the things above our comprehenſion communicated to us; from all which it manifeſtly appears, that reaſon is a judge of the internal as well as the external proofs of a revelation.

What remains is, to conſider reaſon with reſpect to the doctrines of revelation; but we have, in ſome part, anticipated this ſubject: for theſe doctrines are either plain and ſimple, or ſublime and myſterious.

The plain and ſimple doctrines, we have juſt now obſerved, are it's internal evidences, and of which reaſon is a judge.

Sublime or myſterious doctrines are of a mixed nature, partly above our comprehenſion, and partly on a level with it; and where they are on a level with it they are internal proofs of a revelation, but where they are myſterious, revelation is a proof of them; and, therefore, they muſt be conſidered in a double capacity, in an antecedent and ſubſequent ſenſe to the revelation, and, conſequently, they are reciprocally dependent upon one another: for inſtance, ſhould any point of doctrine or matter of fact be promulged in part, of which we were before wholly ignorant, and afterwards have no other means of attaining to the knowledge of it but through this promulgation, then, in the parts which are not revealed,

vealed, the ſubject is myſterious or incomprehenſible, we can form no determinate idea of it, we have no data or principles to go upon, and therefore, in theſe reſpects, it is not the ſubject of reaſon; but the parts which are diſcovered to us are within our comprehenſion; we can conceive that it doth or will exiſt, and in ſuch a manner, with ſuch circumſtances, properties, qualities, and effects, as are diſcloſed to us; and this exiſtence, theſe circumſtances, properties, qualities, and effects, may be brought to, and tried at the bar of reaſon; there it may be inquired whether any of them imply any natural impoſſibility or abſurdity? whether they are contrary to any principles of truth or the ſtanding rules of equity? What is diſcovered to us may likewiſe be a ſubject of our inquiry, what uſes it hath? what ends it ſerves? and, in general, whether it is worthy of the Deity to communicate to mankind, or ſuitable to the dignity and importance of a divine miſſion? in theſe reſpects it is comprehenſible and plain, and is an internal proof of a revelation, and falls within the cognizance and judgment of human reaſon.

Thus, ſhould there be a revelation of future rewards and puniſhments, and ſhould the world be only informed, in general, that all men will be recompenced in another life according to what they have done in this; but ſhould there be no determinate time or place aſſigned for this diſtribution, and no deſcription given of their manner or kind,

then,

then, in theſe reſpects, we ſhould be wholly in the dark; reaſon hath no light to direct it's ſteps, and, therefore, it hath no concern with them, and whatever ſhould be ſuggeſted concerning them would be nothing but the dreams or hallucinations of fancy; for, if the eye hath not ſeen nor the ear heard, if it hath not entered into the heart of man to conceive, what things are prepared for them who love or hate God, they muſt be above our comprehenſion, and can be no ſubjects of human inquiry.

But we can reaſon upon what is revealed, as upon rewards and puniſhments in general, upon their nature, and upon the uſe or neceſſity of additional motives for the encouragement of virtue, and the ſuppreſſion of vice; we can inquire, likewiſe, into their propriety for the ſubject of an Evangelical miſſion: that theſe are the topics of reaſon, and the internal teſtimonies of the divinity of a revelation will evidently appear from a contrary ſuppoſition, for ſhould any pretenders to inſpiration declare, that the wicked man would be rewarded with happineſs in another world, according to the evil he hath done in this life, and that the virtuous will be miſerable in proportion to the good he hath committed here, this repugnancy with the firſt principles of juſtice, would be an ample refutation of what he advanced, and an infallible proof of an impoſture.

Again, when it is inſiſted upon, as an article of faith, or a doctrine of revelation, that the

the bread and wine in the Euchariſt are actually changed into the real Body and Blood of Chriſt. Here, upon the ſuppoſition of ſuch a change, reaſon could be no judge of the circumſtances or manner of it, how, or which way it was done, if the Revelation was ſilent upon theſe points; and, in this ſenſe, the tranſubſtantiation would be myſterious or incomprehenſible; but the underſtanding and external ſenſes are competent judges of the effect, or whether there is ſuch a change; here it may be examined whether it includes any natural contradiction, or ſuppoſes the ſame body to be in different places at the ſame time; here we can reaſon upon it, after the ſame manner as the Jews were commanded to do upon their wooden God; we can try the elements by our ſenſes, whether they have the appearance, the touch, and taſte of bread and wine; we can prove them by ſundry experiments; and if, from the report of all our ſenſes, they ſtill retain the properties of thoſe elements, have we not the ſame authority, and that authority was divine, for truſting to our ſenſes and underſtanding, and inferring, that they are the ſame bread and wine, after conſecration, with the elements from which they were taken, as the Jews had to conclude that their idols, after they had been conſecrated and enſhrined, were ſtill the ſame wood with the block from which they were hewn.

Hence this pretended tranſmutation, which flies ſo violently in the face of common ſenſe, and is charged with the moſt ſhocking conſequences, cannot be a doctrine of Revelation;

but the paſſage in Holy Writ from whence it is taken, muſt have a figurative or allegorical meaning; and, with this meaning, it will appear eaſy and natural, agreeable to the context and the intention of the Author.

Thus are we beholden to reaſon and common ſenſe for exploding this abſurd and blaſphemous doctrine, for reſtoring a divine inſtitution to it's primitive purity, and reſcuing our holy Religion from ſuperſtitions as groſs as ever were practiſed by the moſt ignorant and idolatrous Pagans.

We are commanded to prove all things †; and to try the ſpirits, whether they be of God ‡; but with what ſhall we prove them, or how ſhall this trial be made, unleſs it be by the underſtanding? This, then, is the touchſtone which they muſt be brought to, and if they will not ſtand this teſt, they may be ſafely pronounced falſe and counterfeit. When any of our modern enthuſiaſts preſume upon the gift of inſpiration; when they call their external fervours holy energies, and confidently aſſure us that the Shechinah, or Divine Preſence, is in the tabernacle of their hearts, from the illuminations they perceive within them, ſhould no other argument be offered but what is thus locked up in the cloſet of their minds, and nothing tranſpire from thence, reaſon would be excluded from all examination; for what judgment could be formed of experiences which cannot be deſcribed, of which no idea could be communicated, ſave to thoſe who had felt them, we

† 1 Theſſ. ‡ 1 John iv.

might

might, indeed, look upon them as travellers into an imaginary world, and ſuſpend our faith concerning their marvellous reports, but we could neither confirm nor diſprove them. But, ſhould theſe internal workings of the ſpirit burſt forth at the door of their lips, and vent themſelves in ecſtatic ejaculations to the Deity, and unpremeditated diſcourſes to the people, then they would come within the cognizance of human reaſon, and afford ample matter for the meaneſt capacities to try what ſpirit they are of.

Should it then appear that they ſpeak with more than the tongue of angels, and as no man ever did; ſhould they approve themſelves to be the oracles of truth, and ſay nothing unbecoming the Holy Spirit to utter, then he who hath ears to hear let him hear, let all men reſort to their tabernacles and their oratories, let no word of theirs fall to the ground, but let every ſyllable be written in letters of gold, and faithfully preſerved, as the ſacred records of Heaven.

But ſhould their extemporaneous harangues be a mere rhapſody of nonſenſe, an indigeſted chaos without form or ſubſtance, frequently falſe, and, ſometimes, impious and blaſphemous; ſhould they invoke the God of wiſdom with vain, fooliſh, and preſumptuous ſupplications, or approach the throne of the Almighty Sovereign of Heaven and earth with addreſſes which a rational Being would be aſhamed to make, or receive, from the loweſt of his fellow creatures;

Then

Then out of their own mouths would they be condemned, and their own lips would prove them perverſe! then would reaſon have ſufficient teſtimonies to pronounce that they are dupes to their own vanity, that their zeal is without knowledge, that the ſpirit which works within them is a ſpirit of enthuſiaſtic madneſs, practiſing illuſions upon their minds, palming upon them the moſt profound ignorance for the ſublimeſt wiſdom, and giving utterance to their folly, and that the light within them is nothing but darkneſs, or the falſe glare of an ignis fatuus, which their over-heated imaginations have kindled in their breaſts.

It is no wonder, that theſe flaming bigots ſhould be ſo violent againſt reaſon, when reaſon is ſo ſtrong againſt them; but let them take care how they diſmiſs their underſtanding, leſt they ſhould be deemed beſide themſelves in thoſe things where they will not admit the uſe of it; and he who is out of his ſenſes in any one point is certainly a diſordered perſon, however rational he may acquit himſelf in all others: theſe enthuſiaſts, therefore, are a kind of Don Quixotes in religion: they may talk ſenſibly, and ſhew themſelves men upon indifferent ſubjects, but, touch upon religion, and their underſtanding is fled, and they are taken with fits of lunacy.

Thus have I endeavoured to make good my ſecond obſervation, viz. That reaſon and common ſenſe are the proper judges of religious doctrines; for there are none ſo ſublime and myſterious but what are, in ſome part,

on a level with our underſtanding and there it is a competent judge of them; and even in thoſe parts which are above our comprehenſion, though nothing can be aſcertained from their nature, yet an opinion may be formed of their credibility, from what is known of them, and from an inquiry into the knowledge and veracity of the perſons upon whoſe teſtimony they ſtand: and there it is a ſufficient judge, not to determine, ſcientifically, whether the doctrine be true or falſe, but to determine whether it be an object of our aſſent or diſſent; and though faith, founded upon ſuch evidences, may be ſtyled implicit, yet, as it is builded upon the beſt informations that can be got, it is the moſt rational faith that our imperfect nature will admit of; and, therefore, reaſon is, in every ſenſe, a proper teſt of religious ſubjects.

The third and laſt inference that I ſhall make upon the words of my text is the neceſſity and advantage of Remembrance or recollection in religious ſubjects, Bring it again to mind, O ye tranſgreſſors!

It is not enough to ſhew ourſelves men, by exerting our intellectual powers, in acquiring a rational conviction, but we muſt perſevere in the exerciſe of them to retain that conviction. Religious and Moral Truths are rules of practice in daily uſe for adjuſting our conduct; and therefore they ſhould be ſtrong and effective principles in the mind, always uppermoſt in our thoughts, and ready to offer themſelves to us upon every emergency; for which end it is neceſſary to imprint them deeply on our hearts,

hearts, and conſtantly renew their impreſſion, by refreſhing our memories with them, and continually reflecting upon them.

Moſt of theſe practical truths are Axioms; there are rarely any Mediums clearer than themſelves to prove them by, and they are generally ſo ſelf-evident as not to need them; ſo that if the mind be in a ſtate of conviction they will be acknowledged almoſt as ſoon as heard: men do not want ſo much a Logician as a Prompter, and Reaſoning, eſpecially on common moral or religious topics, is little more than a repetition or recollection of what is known. The chief uſe in diſcourſing on ſuch ſubjects, in exhibiting them in various lights, illuſtrating them by examples, confirming them by different kinds of proofs, and expoſing the abſurdities of their contraries is to engage and detain the attention, to renew the knowledge of them and imprint them upon the mind. It is eaſy to bring men to a ſpeculative aſſent, or an indifferent acquieſcence in theſe truths, but the difficulty lies in raiſing in them a thorough, hearty conviction, in keeping it alive, and making it influence their practice.

The memory is of itſelf naturally weak, and ſoon lets go anything that is not often inculcated, or ſtrictly committed to it's charge, and we frequently render it much weaker by our prejudices, partialities and paſſions; preſent pleaſures or profits are ſtrangely apt to engroſs the attention and ſuppreſs the little memory we have of duty that offers to riſe up againſt them. Men do not err from natu-

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ral ignorance, but from wilful forgetfulneſs; they know what is right, but they will not think of it, they thruſt it from them.

*To Do as we would be Done by*, is ſuch an evident principle of equity, that every one ſubſcribes to it, upon the firſt hearing; and the reaſon why it is not as univerſally practiſed is, becauſe it is excluded by other thoughts, and from want of being recollected or brought again to mind, it is the ſame as if it never had been there, and is an inactive, dead principle within us.

In like manner an intelligent Being could never be brought to offer the greateſt violence to his ſenſes, and ſtupidly practiſe the groſſeſt abſurdities in religion, was he not intoxicated with the fumes of ſuperſtition and enthuſiaſm, and determined to ſhut his eyes and ſleep upon his duty.

To conclude; from the whole of what hath been obſerved in this diſcourſe, let us conſider, that Religion is a Subject of the higheſt importance; that it is the behaviour of a creature to his Creatour, or of a Rational Being to the God of Reaſon. Let us conſider likewiſe what groſs abſurdities and horrid impieties have been and may be introduced into religious worſhip; and, as it appears that Reaſon is a competent judge and a proper teſt of it's doctrines, and that there is no ſecurity againſt theſe corruptions but the underſtanding; it muſt be principally incumbent on us to exert ourſelves in the application of it to theſe ſubjects: in order, therefore, to raiſe ourſelves from the ſlumbers of enthuſiaſm and ſuper-

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ſtition we ſhould do well to have a remembrancer, after the example of Philip, king of Macedon, who might put us daily in mind that we are men, that we have the uſe of rational faculties and ſhould ſhew that we have the uſe of them upon every occaſion; and, ſince God hath diſtinguiſhed us for intelligent Beings, we ought to diſtinguiſh ourſelves as ſuch, and moſt eſpecially in thoſe things which relate to Him. If it be our duty and our intereſt to conſider and ſhew ourſelves men in all other reſpects, why muſt religion alone be exempted from it? If reaſon makes us religious Beings, how can it be ſuppoſed that religion ſhould make us the moſt irrational? If the ſervice of our Maker be our nobleſt employment, why doth it not merit our nobleſt endowment? or why muſt we ſhew ourſelves leſs than men, in that which will make us more than men? Who hath required this at our hands? Surely the God of wiſdom, who hath cloathed us with this wedding garment, will never expect that we ſhould ſtrip ourſelves of it when we come into His preſence? This then is a nakedneſs which we ought to be moſt aſhamed of, and, inſtead of expoſing ourſelves before Him, we ſhould rather call upon the mountains to cover us, and the hills to fall on us. Let us, therefore, above all things, take care how we offer upon the altar of infinite wiſdom the ſacrifice of fools; and let us endeavour to recommend ourſelves to Him who is pure Intelligence itſelf; by heightening the reſemblance we bear of Him, and worſhiping Him in ſpirit and in truth.

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